

INDUS-MESOPOTAMIAN TRADE: THE RECORD IN THE INDUS

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Introduction

The story of mid-third millennium BC contacts between the Indus Civilization and the west has been told in several places (e.g. Oppenheim 1954; Asthana 1976, Ratnagar 1981; Possehl 1996a) (Fig. 1). In fact, it was seals from Susa, Ur and other sites in Mesopotamia that were stylistically similar to those found at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa that gave archaeologists their first chronological estimate for the age of the Indus Civilization (Sayce 1924). There are many perfectly good Indus artifacts in Mesopotamian sites of the third millennium. A selection of these is given in Fig. 2, with the site and a citation. If ‘Meluhha’ is a Sumerian referent for the Indus Civilization, which seems to be the case, then there were Indus peoples in Mesopotamia, even a translator of the Meluhhan language (Possehl 1996a).

The documentation of Indus, or Indus-like, material in the west is reasonably strong, but the record is not balanced. There is not nearly as much Mesopotamian, or Mesopotamian-like, material in the Indus. But, there is some, and this paper offers me an opportunity to present it, in light of Professor Lamberg-Karlovsky’s long interest in third millennium trade. Another presentation of this theme was attempted by the late E. C. L. Durning Caspers (1985). This paper should be used cautiously. Whether her thesis that there were Sumerian merchants resident in Indus settlements is correct or not, can be left to the individual reader.

‘Western’ material in the greater Indus Valley

The two best examples of ‘western’ material in Indus contexts are the copper-bronze toilet article from Harappa (Fig. 3) and the Persian Gulf seal from Lothal. The toilet set, comprising an earscoop, piercer and

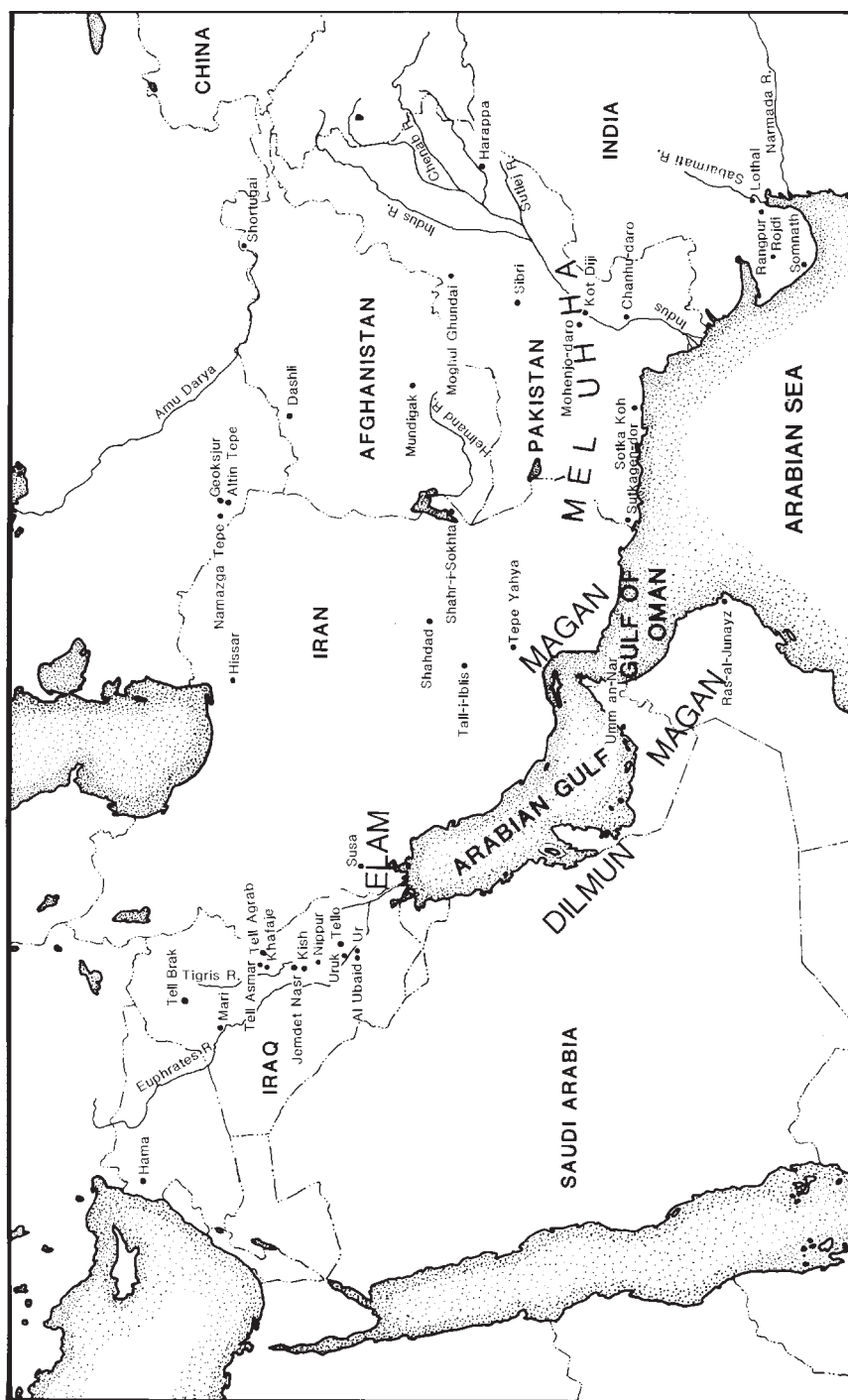


Fig.1. Places mentioned in the text.

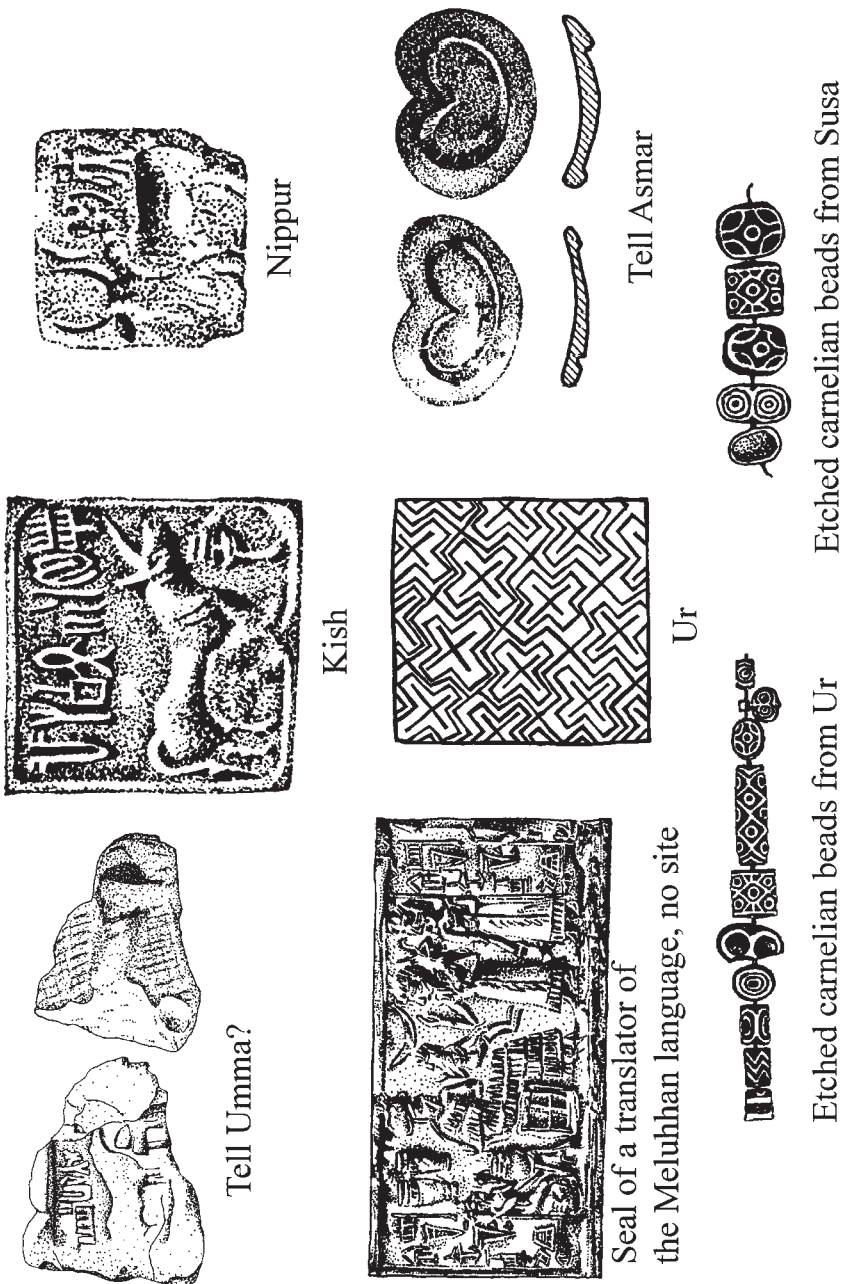


Fig. 2. Selection of Indus artifacts from Mesopotamia.

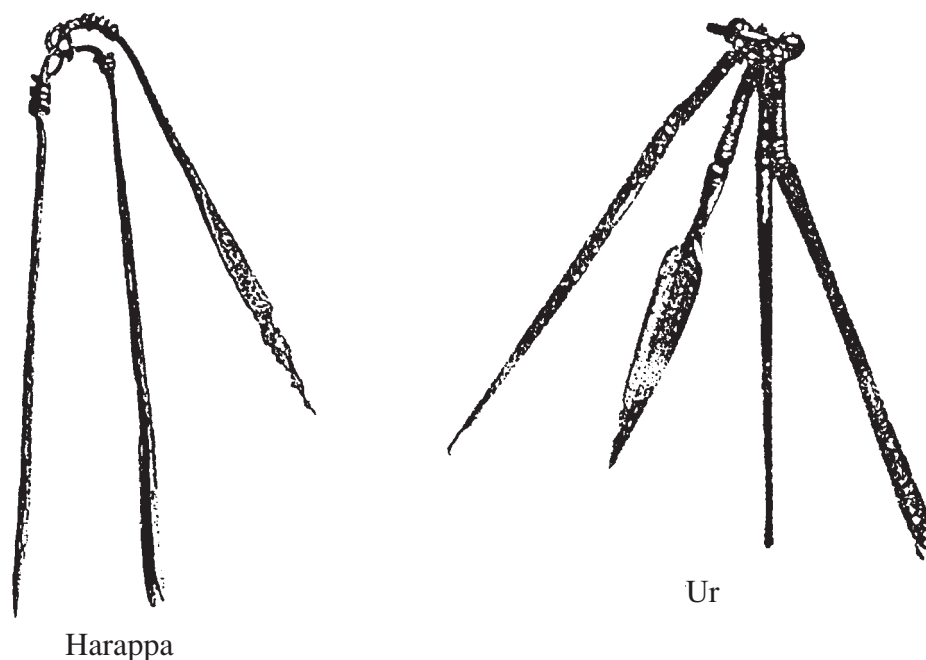


Fig. 3. Copper-bronze toilet articles from Harappa and Ur.

tweezers is from a trench in the ravine south of the *Naugaza* tomb on the high AB Mound, three feet below surface (Vats 1940: 390, Pl. CXXV, 1). This would probably be late third millennium in date. It has a rather precise parallel at Ur (Woolley 1934: Pl. 159b). This set of implements seems to date to Early Dynastic III and to be quite at home in Mesopotamia. Eleven (or twelve?) toilet sets of this kind were reported from Kish (Mackay 1929: 169, Pl. XLIII, 1-8). The Persian Gulf seal from Lothal was a surface find (Fig. 4) (Rao 1963; 1985: 318, Pl. CLXI, B & C). 'The material of which the Lothal seal is made is steatite of a light grey color with a creamy surface. Its diameter is 2.25 cm. and the thickness at the center 1.2 cm. At the back is a perforated boss covering almost the entire surface and divided by triple lines between four circles with a central dot. On the face are two jumping goats or gazelle-like animals looking behind and flanking a double-headed dragon. Both in motif and shape this seal is entirely different from the normal square seals of the Indus Civilization and from the Sumerian cylinder seals. It bears no script of any kind' (Rao 1963: 96).

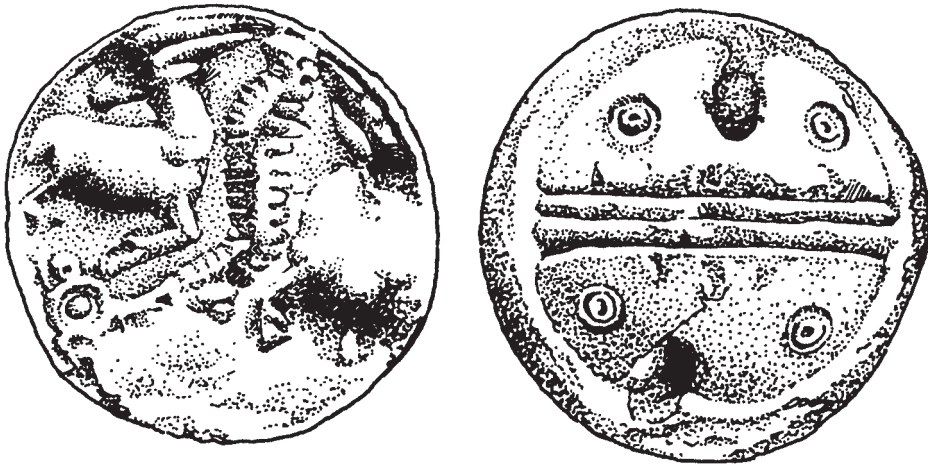


Fig. 4. Persian Gulf seal from Lothal.

Other 'Persian Gulf' Seals in the Indus Valley

There are five other seals which might be considered to be at least 'Persian Gulf-like' in Indus contexts. They are illustrated in Fig. 5 and listed in Table 1. There are also cylinder seals in the Indus, which are Mesopotamian-like.

Cylinder Seals in the Indus

There are four cylinder seals in Indus context that merit consideration in the context of this paper. None of them are Mesopotamian *per se*, nor do any of the examples have writing, either cuneiform or Indus. They are listed in Table 2.

This list excludes the cylindrical ivory rods, which are not necessarily seals (Marshall 1931: Pl. CXIV.529-33). It also omits the object in (Mackay 1937-38: Pl. XCVI.509), and the cylinder seals from Harappa noted in Daring Caspers (1984: 364-65). The Mackay object is a fragment not included in his discussion of Harappan cylinder seals (Mackay 1937-38: 344-45), therefore there is reasonable doubt that it is actually a cylinder. It also omits the BMAC seals from Sibri (Jarrige 1985: 109).

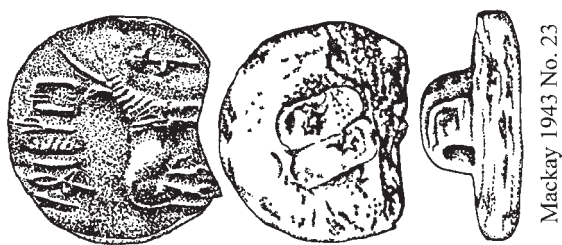


Fig. 5. 'Persian Gulf' seals from the Indus.

Table 1. Persian Gulf-like seals from the Indus Civilization

<i>Site</i>	<i>Citation</i>	<i>Description</i>
Mohenjo-daro	Marshall 1931: Pl. CX, No. 309	Short horned bull, head lowered to a manger, six Indus signs
Mohenjo-daro	Marshall 1931: Pl. CXII, No. 383	Six animals in a pin-wheel, one sign visible, broken. This seal is comparable to a Persian Gulf seal from Bahrain (Mortensen 1971: Fig. 8)
Mohenjo-daro	Marshall 1931: Pl. CXIV, 478	Six Indus signs on a broken seal
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: Pl. XCVI, No. 500	Short-horned bull, head lowered to a manger, three Indus signs
Chanhu-daro	Mackay 1943: 148, Pl. LI, No. 23	Unicorn below six Indus characters

Table 2. Cylinder seals in Indus context

<i>Site</i>	<i>Citation</i>	<i>Description</i>
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 344, Pl. LXXXIV, 78	Soft white stone 'barber pole' motif
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 344, Pl. LXXXIX, 376 and D	Calcite seal with an 'insect' and 'bovid'
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 344-45, XCVI, 488	Steatite seal with two quadrupeds, birds(?) and vegetation
Kalibangan, Mature Harappan	Thapar 1975: 29	Seal with human and human/animal figures in a scene

While these cylinder seals are not Mesopotamian, clearly they are not Indus either. But, they are cylinders and their importance seems to lie in a point made by Professor Lamberg-Karlovsky: 'A related matter of shared ideology and meaning can be derived from seals. The use of very distinctive, highly individualized styles and shapes of seals of the Indus (square), Persian Gulf (round), Mesopotamia (cylindrical), and Turkmenistan-Seistan (compartmented) in the middle of the third millennium is, I

believe, far from accidental. The seals made it possible to identify the mother country of the merchant and the origin of the traded commodity without opening the bundle of goods, thus facilitating storage, taxation, further shipment and other functions. The seals, in short, provided an overt symbol of ethnic identity as well as a practical tool for trade regulation. It is interesting to note that coincidence in the distribution of distinctive seal types is overlapped by the distribution of equally distinctive ceramic types' (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975: 362-63).

Weights

Mesopotamian type 'barrel weights' have been found at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. These are listed in Table 3.

Table 3.

<i>Site</i>	<i>Citation</i>
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1931: 463, HR 1115
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1931: 463, VS 2905
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1931: 463, C. 315
Mohenjo-daro	Sahni 1931: 219, VS 2952
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 4486
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 11096
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 11232d
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 11232e
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 3485
Mohenjo-daro	Mackay 1937-38: 403, DK 5302
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. 47
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. 48
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. 7597
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. B1480
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. A333
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No number
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. 12063
Harappa	Vats 1940: 362, No. A347

Vats (1940: 361) notes that: 'Eight complete and two fragmentary weights of this type have been found at Harappa'. It is therefore evident that two of the specimens (the fragments?) are missing from this list. The weights of these objects is given in the original sources and Possehl (1996a: 177).

In a discussion of these weights Mackay says, 'This type of weight was used in Egypt, where it was frequently made of hematite. It is found in considerable numbers in Mesopotamia, where in early times (pre-Sargonic) it was made of limestone or even alabaster, and in the later times of hematite. Weights of this type were also common in early times in Elam' (Mackay 1931: 463-64). It is interesting that the weights of this shape were not discussed in Hemmy's consideration of weights from Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (1931), even though he sought comparisons with western weight systems.

Metal Objects

There are a few metal objects which might be imports from the west, animal headed pins, for example. But, none of these seem to be specifically Mesopotamian, the BMAC being the more likely source for them. 'We dismiss them as evidence of trade, but see in their popularity throughout late 3rd millennium Western Asia an indication of a common tradition in the manufacture of pins' (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1972: 225).

Figurines and Sculpture

There are several figurines or pieces of sculpture that appear to be at least Mesopotamian-like. The best of them is a small recumbent bull of copper-bronze from Lothal (Rao 1985: Figure 117.1), so clearly comparable to Mesopotamian examples, as from the Royal Cemetery (Woolley 1934: Pls. 141-143) (Fig. 6). Several other observations about these objects that pertain to this paper are: 1) the Lothal recumbent bull is without a hump, so it would seem to be a *Bos taurus*, the western breed of cattle, not the Indian *Bos indicus*; 2) the examples from both localities are also small, the one from Lothal being about 2.5 centimeters in length; and 3) the Lothal bull is without a beard, and those from Ur at least all seem to be of the bearded variety. In the end my guess would be that the Lothal recumbent bull is probably a local product, but one made on a western model.

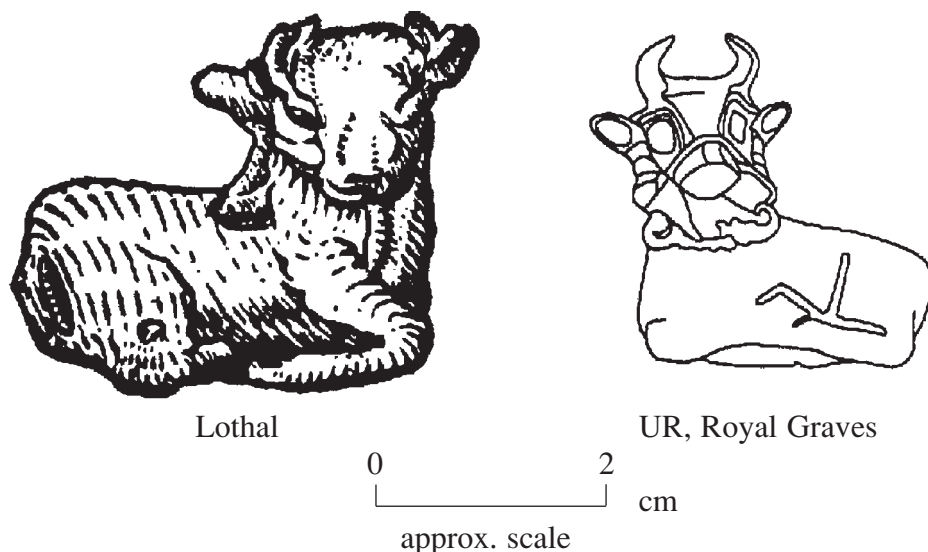
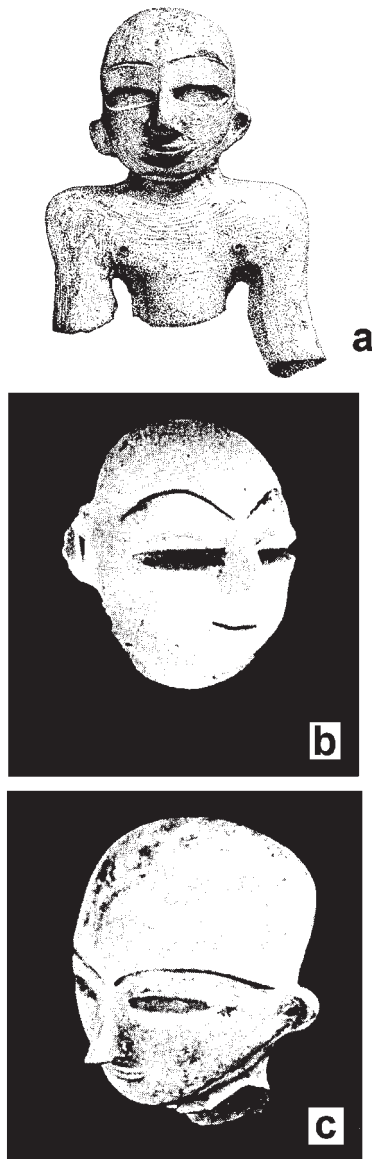


Fig. 6. Recumbant bulls from Lothal and Ur.

Two terracotta figurines from Mehrgarh (Jarrige and Lechevallier 1979: 526 and Anonymous 1987: 254, A 87) are remarkable for their baldness and the treatment of the eyebrow as a slit (Fig. 7). There is an unusual quality to these pieces, which come from Period VII (ca. 28-2500 B.C.) and could recall Near Eastern comparisons.

Further afield, there is an interesting terracotta head from Lothal with a square cut beard has been suggested to be the representation of a Mesopotamian (Rao 1973: Pl. XXII.D) (Fig. 8). The piece is certainly not within the Indus norm, at least if compared to the limestone sculpture from Mohenjo-daro and the other busts just noted.

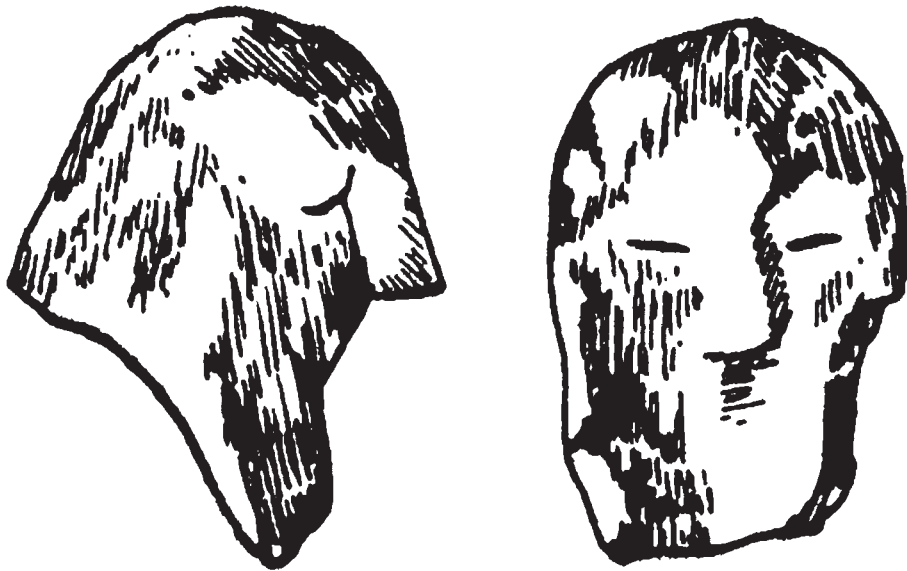
Finally, there is a stone bust of a male from the site of Dabar Kot (Stein 1929: Pl. XVI; During Caspers 1963; 1965) has been compared to one from the Early Dynastic Nintu Temple VI at Khafaje (Frankfort 1943; During Caspers 1965: 54). Other parallels are said to exist at Tell Asmar, Lagash and Al-'Ubaid, while parallels with South Arabian material have been ruled out (During Caspers 1965: 55).



Three bald figurines from Mehrgarh VII

- a. Jarrige, Jarrige, Meadow and Quivron 1995: Figure 4.8
ca. 4.5 cm high
- b. Jarrige, Jarrige, Meadow and Quivron 1995: Figure 2.37c
ca. 3 cm high
- c. Jarrige, Jarrige, Meadow and Quivron 1995: Figure 3.16c
ca. 4.5 cm high

Fig. 7. Three bald male figurines from Mehrgarh.



Lothal A

After S. R. Rao 1985: Figure 28, No. 1

Fig. 8. Terracotta figurine from Lothal of a Mesopotamian?

Mythological Themes and other Motifs

The well-known Near Eastern 'contest scene' between man and animal is also represented in the Indus. This has been extensively reviewed by Asko Parpola (1984; also see Mackay 1937-38: 337) in a very well illustrated paper. The Indus motif generally involves a human in combat with two tigers and is found on the stamp seals and glyptic materials characteristic of the Mature Harappan (Fig. 9). The motif is thought to be one characteristic of the Near East (Fig. 10). A Harappan parallel for the bull-man 'Enkidu' was seen by Sir John Marshall (1931: 67, 76) in a seal from Mohenjo-daro, where a similar creature seems to attach a horned tiger (Fig. 11). But this persisting comparison cannot be correct, as has been pointed-out by Heinz Mode (1959: 64) for prominent breasts clearly indicate the female sex of this human, semi-bovine being' (Parpola 1984: 178). Parpola goes on to investigate this theme and finds a better parallel between the iconography of Proto-Elamite seals from Susa (Amiet 1961:



Mackay 1937-38 No. 375



Mackay 1937-38 No. 86

Fig. 9. Contest scene in the Indus Civilization.

574, 575) and a triangular prism sealing from Harappa showing the 'bull-man' (Vats 1940: Pl. 93.305).

Further comparisons can be made between Proto-Elamite glyptic portrayals of the 'lotus' (Legrain 1921: 62-254) and painted designs on Early Harappan ceramics at Kalibangan (*Indian Archaeology, A Review* 1962-63: 24), dating to ca. 3000-2500 B. C. The same motif occurs at Mundigak IV (Casal 1961: Fig. 102, No. 485) and Kulli, both of which would be contemporary with the Mature Harappan (Possehl 1986: 31, Kulli V.ix.3).

Closing remarks

There is a lack of balance between the archaeological record regarding the trade between the Indus Civilization and Mesopotamia. There is a good deal more Indus material in Sumer and Akkad than there is in Mesopotamian material in ancient India. The texts of Mesopotamia add a greater sense of a lack of balance here.

One would suppose that this lack of balance in the archaeological record is due to the products that were traded and the methods that were used in their distribution. H. Crawford (1973) probably has some of the answer in her notion of 'invisible' products of trade: cloth, food, oils and the like. But, perishables that are traded come in bundles and there is packing to be considered, and written documents that administer trade.



Fara



Susa

Fig.10. Contest scene in Mesopotamia.

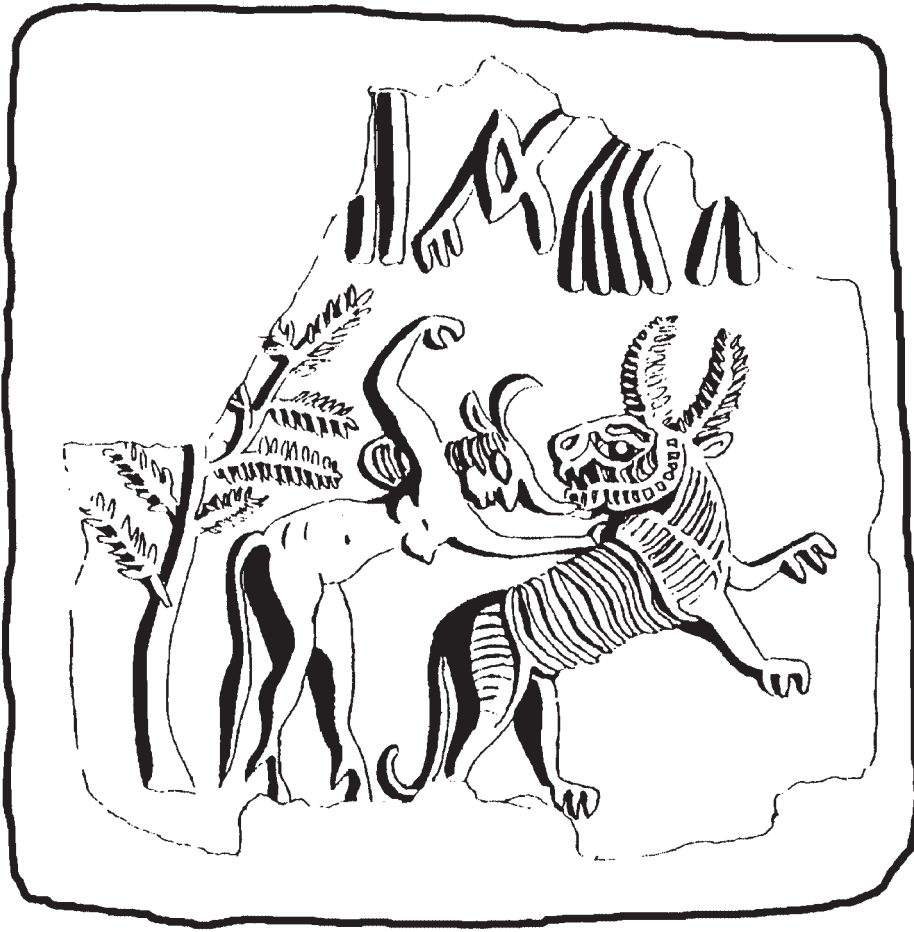


Fig. 11. Female horned tiger from the Indus Civilization in combat.

Thus, we should expect Mesopotamian sealings from bundles of cloth, and Mesopotamian pots if grain and fish oil were traded. Moreover, 'invisible' products do not explain the fact that there is good evidence for the undeciphered Indus script (Possehl 1996b) in Mesopotamia but not one example of cuneiform writing in the Indus.

With these observations in mind I am forced to conclude that the 'mechanisms of trade', i.e. the institutions of commerce and the form of the transactions, were different in the Indus Civilization and Mesopotamia. This is not surprising, since the Indus Civilization and Mesopotamia are

quite independent sociocultural systems. It is within the sociocultural fabric of these two civilizations that the explanation of the differential distribution of material culture lies, not just with 'invisible' products.

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